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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the growing trend of collaboration among school districts, addressing the national trend in general and examining the perspective of and the trends in Mississippi in particular. The trend in Mississippi is a natural outgrowth of the reform movement in the state and will probably continue on both a formal and an informal basis because of the successes of existing consortia that have been particularly effective in the development of staff development programs. Details on how the Education Reform Act influenced the development of five formal consortia are provided, including discussion on state financing and private funds involved in establishment of the consortia. Program aspects such as leadership, involvement, group size, membership costs, and services are also described, as well as methods of informal collaboration. (CB)

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COLLABORATION AMONG DISTRICTS:

ANOTHER ANSWER!

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COLLABORATION AMONG DISTRICTS:
ANOTHER ANSWER!

- I. National Trend
- II. Mississippi Perspective
 - A. Education Reform Act
 - B. State Financing
 - C. Mellon Grant Study
- III. Mississippi Consortia Movement
 - A. Leadership and Involvement
 - B. Size of Groups
 - C. Cost of Membership
 - D. Services Rendered
- IV. Informal Collaboration

As school districts' budgets get tighter, more and more districts across the nation are searching for ways to stretch their staff development dollars. One means many districts have discovered for addressing this problem is a national trend toward collaboration among neighboring districts. This national movement of establishing consortia for the purpose of developing and implementing staff development programs is also spreading across the state of Mississippi as districts discover that through working together they can get the most out of their staff development expenditures. This trend in Mississippi is, however, a natural outgrowth of the reform movement in the state and of the Mellon Grant Research which has been conducted. The trend is also one that should continue on both a formal and an informal basis because of the successes of the existing consortia.

The idea of the consortium did not begin with Mississippi, nor is it restricted to one state. Several years ago, Dr. James Condra (1986) of the University of Alabama developed a training model that has expanded into a consortium of a dozen school districts surrounding the University. Another consortium is the Institute for Educational Research, a non-profit organization of 125

school districts which operates in Illinois working with the school personnel in all phases of the development of the inservice program (Cunningham and Nieminen, 1986). The Southeast Idaho Teacher Center Consortium, which serves seventy public and private school systems, is the largest rural teacher center in the country (Boston, et al., 1982). These organizations illustrate the extent of this movement, but today's consortia vary in size and purpose as well as in location. For example, the Mid-Continental Regional Education Laboratory has established an Effective School Program that spans the seven-state mountain plains region. This collaborative effort emphasizes data collection, training, coaching, and development of training materials (Sikorski & Ewy, 1984). On the other hand, a consortium formed in 1982 by six small schools in Missouri in cooperation with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provides training and encourages the development of educational microcomputer applications (Weible, et al, 1983). Contrasting with that effort is the New York City Teacher Centers Consortium which trains elementary and secondary school teachers to become staff development specialists (Safe, 1982). This consortium idea is a practical solution to a problem faced by an increasing number of districts across the country. As Helen H. Martinson (1984) states in Principal, "Matters like inservice are normally handled within each district." She then describes the consortium of her own district with two

other districts in central New Jersey by saying this effort has been a success as the districts "were finding it harder and harder to keep pace with staff development in the face of fewer funds and resources." In all regions of the country, districts are working together to share ideas and resources.

For this reason, one is not surprised to discover that Mississippi is also using this solution. The Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 mandated staff development for all state-accredited schools. That mandate was put into effect in 1984-85 with a pilot program that included sixteen school districts. Full implementation came in 1985-86 with all the school districts in the state offering a full staff development program. The state funding for the program was \$10.69 per teacher unit the first year; however, that funding has increased to only \$11.07 per teacher unit by 1987-88 school year. That amount is far less than the \$25 per teacher unit that was requested. District allocations in 1987-88 from the state for staff development range from \$243 to \$16,963 per school district depending on the number of teacher units. When these amounts are compared with the thousands of dollars top industries spend per person for training, one can quickly see the challenge the school districts face in getting quality training for their limited money.

The passage of the Education Reform Act in November, 1982, and the limited state financial support of the staff development program of that Act have forced the State Department of Education and the local districts to seek creative solutions. A Mellon Grant Study conducted in 1983 did suggest one approach to the problem. That study concluded that the best or the most effective staff development should be trifold in involvement, including leadership from the state education agency, the local education agency, and the university level. This idea has, however, become a reality as consortia have sprung up across the state. Of the five formally organized groups operating in the state, all are associated with at least one university. The State Department of Education also has informal involvement with all groups, and it is formally cooperating with two consortia at this point in the development of materials.

Two of the consortia began activities in the 1970's with their roles changing as education reform became a reality in the state. The Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) (1987) was founded in 1972. During the time of federal funding, it employed a full-time director, who planned with the superintendents for projects and activities geared to the needs of all member districts. Today the thirteen member districts work closely with the University of Mississippi to provide certain projects. The other consortium begun in the 1970's was the Program of Research

and Evaluation for Public Schools (1986). This private non-profit Mississippi corporation, begun in 1975, is headquartered at Mississippi State University. Although it began with seven districts, its membership has grown to thirty districts today through its stated concept of schools helping each other.

The other three formal consortia in Mississippi began after the Education Reform Act. The first of these to be organized was the Mississippi Effective Schools Consortium begun in 1983. Representatives from several Mississippi school districts assembled to share ideas based on school needs and the requirements of the Reform Act. The consortium was organized as a means of identifying common needs and developing and producing materials and training based on those needs. This consortium initiated a "first" in Mississippi - - a networking system composed of public schools, universities, and the State Department of Education. As Dr. Swinton Hill (Mississippi Effective Schools Consortium, 1987), Executive Secretary of the board, has said, "Much can be accomplished together rather than charting one's own course."

The second consortium established after the Mississippi Education Reform Act was the Southern Education Consortium (SEC) (1987) begun in October, 1985. This non-profit organization, begun to bring about improvement in education in Mississippi, provides for cooperative interaction between

the University of Southern Mississippi and public schools. One unique feature of this fifty-four member organization is that it includes one school district from another state. As a result of this success, the SEC is now actively seeking the membership of other districts outside the state of Mississippi.

The last formal consortium to be organized is the East Mississippi Center for Educational Development (1987). This consortium organized in March, 1987, is unique in the fact that its funding is provided by a grant from the Phil Hardin Foundation. The Center functions primarily to serve the staff development needs of the sixteen member districts. This group like the other consortia in the state is, however, affiliated with a state university - in this case, the Meridian branch of Mississippi State University. Dr. Gary Benton, the coordinator of the Center, is an employee of the University.

The costs of membership in these five consortia range from nothing to \$5,000 with varying services offered by each. The East Mississippi Center for Educational Development is funded 100 percent by the Phil Hardin Foundation for two years; however, there is a phase-in provision which will enable participating districts to assume gradually a share of the financial operations of the Center. The meetings of this organization focus on staff development planning strategies, sharing resources and

personnel, investigating ways and means to engage in cooperative activities, and purchasing various resources and services. Of equal importance, the meetings serve as a forum for the sharing of ideas and frustrations. Various staff development materials are housed at the Center and are available to participating districts. In addition, the Center serves as a training site for staff development presenters.

The Southern Education Consortium charges an annual membership fee of \$500. Its services provide completed research, current research, and available materials. The current projects include a grant from the State Department of Education to develop a long range planning model for the five-year plan required of all Mississippi accredited schools; a Mississippi Teachers' Assessment Instrument resource manual to assist administrators in helping teachers to achieve the teaching competencies; and five survey needs assessment instruments targeted for different audiences within the school community. In addition, this consortium shares a computer-based instructional management plan with its member districts. A "no-pass, no-play" study is also being conducted in Mississippi schools, and a task force has been developed to sample policies, procedures, and criteria for the promotion and retention of students. Additionally, a monthly newsletter is compiled from current resources concerning the implications of legal decisions in education,

and the newsletter is mailed to member school districts in a clear, concise format.

The Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) was originally funded by grants; however, the members now pay annual dues of \$1500. The superintendents of the member districts meet monthly, and the staff development coordinators meet on a regular basis to plan the staff development programs of their individual districts. This group is currently piloting the James Condra model of staff development in confederation with the University of Mississippi. The member schools also collaborate on instructional management plans and on the meeting of standards related to the state performance-based accreditation. RESA recently ran a math needs assessment to determine the strengths and weaknesses of math programs in member schools, and they are in the process of writing a federal project to address other identified needs.

The Program of Research and Evaluation for the Public Schools charges a fee of \$5000 for membership. In exchange, it offers Test Item Bank, a unique minicomputer based system that covers all basic subjects K-12 and produces a ready to print criterion referenced test. The test items are field-tested and undergo quality assurances of content validity, reliability, and sensitivity to instruction. The consortium provides leadership and direction to its members for the integrated implementation of the Education Reform Act, the

Uniform School Law, and the plan for instructional management. A program of shared local initiatives also offers an opportunity for sharing of information among member districts on technology and instruction. Additionally, the highly skilled staff of PREPS offers research; evaluation testing; instructional design, management, and technology. Two annual meetings of all members are currently held for exchange of ideas among members.

The Mississippi Effective Schools Consortium has a sliding scale of membership cost ranging from a one phase cost of \$3,500 to a complete phase cost of \$6,700. There is an initial charge for membership with a small annual fee being assessed as needed; however, no annual fee was assessed in 1987-88 because of the grants received by the group. This group's stated purpose is "to design and make available effective educationally-oriented management tools and training courses for the efficient operation of public school systems and to provide these materials in a cost effective format that meets the specific needs of Mississippi schools in fulfilling the requirements of accountability in instructional management and the Mississippi Education Reform Act." The program offered by this consortium consists of a staff development program with four phases: effective school staff development, steps of the teaching act, Mississippi teaching competencies, and multicultural education. A networking process is also in

place with outstanding leaders from public schools and all of the state's institutions of higher education. Other services include a catalogue of staff development inservices; audio-visual support materials; Impact II participation; and information about needs assessment, five year plans, school improvement plans, and shared governance.

These five formal consortia provide cost effective staff development services for many districts across the state of Mississippi with several of Mississippi's 153 public school districts retaining membership in more than one of the consortia because of the complementary nature of the services. However, some districts have banded together in a less formal way. For example, several school districts along the Gulf Coast have established an organization for the express purpose of collaborating on staff development planning and implementation. Three smaller school districts in Washington County - Western Line, Hollandale, and Leland - have also informally established a working relationship to provide training for professional support personnel such as librarians, counselors, and speech/language specialists. This effort meets a need for these smaller districts to provide specialized training when they have only one or two people who fit into a job category.

As the consortia movement in Mississippi grows, districts discover that such collaboration among districts is indeed an effective means of providing quality training

on a limited budget. The successes of the existing organizations also support the Mellon Grant Research results stating that staff development efforts should include leadership from the university level and the local education level in cooperation with the State Department of Education. That success also reinforces the trend across the nation that collaboration among districts is a viable solution - or another answer - to stretching the staff development dollar.

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